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Christianity

The beliefs and practices of Christianity are based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Christianity is divided into three main denominations: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. There are more Christians in the world (some 2 billion at the beginning of the 21st century) than followers of any other single religion. (See also [Jesus Christ](#).)

Origins and Ancient History

Christianity was born in the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD, and the new religion and its earliest believers emerged from Judaism, which had spread from its homeland in Judaea throughout the entire Roman Empire. The religion of the Jews provided important texts (the Hebrew Scriptures, or what Christians call the Old Testament) for the first Christians along with such critical concepts as the coming of the messiah and the end of time. Ideas about God's relationship with human beings and belief in the resurrection of the dead were also part of Christianity's inheritance from the Judaism of the time. Judaism in the 1st century was itself in the process of development, and a variety of beliefs and practices were accepted as part of the Jewish tradition. Of particular note is the Judaism associated with the group at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered; the beliefs of this community anticipated in some ways those of Christianity.



An early 5th-century mosaic in a semicircular

An early 5th-century mosaic in a semicircular portion of a church in Rome shows Christ, the Apostles, and the four evangelists (represented by the beasts). (Credit: De Antonis)

The founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth (c. 6-4 BC–c. AD 30), was the son of Jewish parents, Joseph and Mary. Little is known of his youth beyond such events as his birth and the incident in the Temple where he was discovered discussing the faith with religious elders. These episodes and the detailed accounts of his adult ministry are recorded in four books that became the central texts of Christian belief—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which were written up to several generations after the death of Jesus (see [Bible](#)). During his ministry, Jesus healed the sick, resurrected the dead, and worked other miracles. He was a preacher of great charisma who attracted many followers; the most important of whom were his twelve closest disciples, the Apostles. Drawing from the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was coming soon and encouraged his followers to live moral lives. In his famous Sermon on the Mount he taught that the powerless were God's children and that earthly wealth would not lead to salvation. He also preached that one should love one's enemies. Jesus shared bread and wine with his Apostles at the Last Supper, an act that would become one of the central rites of Christianity, and accepted death on the cross to atone for the sins of all humankind. His followers believe that three days after his death Jesus rose from the dead and after

telling his followers to continue spreading his message he ascended into heaven.



In The Conversion of Saint Paul the painter

In The Conversion of Saint Paul the painter Caravaggio shows the apostle overwhelmed by a vision of Christ. (Credit: Scala/Art Resource, New York)

The most important figure in Christian history, after Jesus, was the apostle Paul. A devout Jew, Paul at first persecuted the Christians but joined them after he experienced a vision in which Jesus asked why Paul persecuted him. After his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul became the new faith's greatest missionary. Jesus and his earliest followers preached only to the Jewish community, but Paul spread it to those who were not Jewish. He emphasized the importance of the sacrifice and Resurrection of Jesus and that it was necessary for God to become man in order to atone for the sin of Adam. He also taught the importance of God's grace and the necessity of faith for salvation, teachings that would become very important in the later history of Christianity. (See also [Paul](#).)

The first Christians expected Jesus to return in glory in their lifetimes, but when he did not, later generations began the difficult job of building the church. The early Christians baptized converts and spread the teachings of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. They built places of worship and established the early communities, led by priests and their overseers, the bishops. The greatest bishops were those who were believed to be the successors of apostles. The first bishops of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome are each held to have been one of the apostles. According to tradition, Peter was the first bishop of Rome, and this bishop would later become the pope.

Christians occasionally suffered persecution under the Romans, and the worst persecutions occurred in the mid-3rd and early 4th centuries when Roman emperors sought to destroy the church. However, the early church managed to grow under the Romans, in part because the early Christians found a way to

introduce their beliefs to the pagans around them. By the 2nd century, the basic structure of the Christian Bible had been established. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries a group of Christian writers, the apologists, sought to explain the faith in Greek and Latin, the languages of learning and government. They also began to interpret the faith using concepts of ancient philosophy so that learned pagans could understand and accept it. The most important of these early theologians, Origen, developed a Christian theology using the philosophy of Plato. By the late 4th and early 5th centuries, another group of Christian intellectuals established the foundation of all later Christian theology. St. Jerome prepared the Vulgate Bible, an elegantly written text of the Bible in Latin compiled from the best Greek and Hebrew texts. Pope Gregory I the Great was the model for many later popes. St. Augustine's commentaries on matters of the faith remained influential for many centuries and continue to influence thinkers today.

Despite persecution, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire by AD 400. Constantine, the first Christian emperor, legalized and promoted Christianity, and the emperor Theodosius made Christianity the state religion. Constantine also presided over the first ecumenical council, at Nicaea in 325, at which the official church teaching concerning the relationship between God the Father and God the Son was established.

The Middle Ages and the Reformation

The triumph of the church in the 4th century occurred at the time of Rome's waning glory. Christianity faced a new challenge in the 5th century as the Roman Empire was transformed by the so-called barbarian invasions. As the empire fell and a new civilization emerged, Christianity expanded beyond the Roman Empire, developed important institutions, and advanced toward a dramatic division of the Christian church.

According to tradition, the apostle St. Thomas spread Christianity to India. Although there is little evidence for this, Christians appeared in central and southern Asia by the late 2nd and 3rd centuries. Christian communities were later established along the main trade route to China. Translations of Christian texts were made into Chinese, and a famous Christian monument was constructed in Xi'an, China, in 781. Christianity subsequently faced persecution and decline, however. Asian Christians also lost contact with their western counterparts after the birth of Islam.

Christianity made inroads into Africa as well. Christians in Egypt, especially in Alexandria, shaped much of

Christian doctrine, including the Nicene Creed, and St. Anthony of Egypt, one of the earliest monks, helped develop the monastic tradition that was so important in Christian history. In the 4th century an apostle, St. Frumentius, from Syria preached the faith and was made bishop in Ethiopia, and the ruler of the Ethiopian kingdom of Aksum converted and established Christianity as the faith of the kingdom. By the 6th century much of the kingdom had accepted Coptic Christianity (a form of the religion that holds that Christ had a single divine nature). The church survived for centuries, even after it was cut off from the rest of the Christian world following the expansion of Islam.

While Christianity took its first steps beyond its original homeland, it underwent lasting changes in what was once the Roman Empire. Clovis I, the ruler of much of Gaul from 481 to 511, became the first Germanic king to accept Catholic Christianity. Other medieval kings, especially Charlemagne, the greatest ruler of the Middle Ages, promoted and defended Christianity, imposing the faith on conquered peoples and making laws to improve the lives and practices of Christians. Later nobles and kings led armies to the Holy Lands during the Crusades, a series of military expeditions that began in the late 11th century in response to Muslim wars of expansion.

European kings of the Middle Ages were often very religious and depended on monks and priests to help them rule. Monks were among the most learned people of the period. The father of Western monasticism was St. Benedict of Nursia. At his monastery in Monte Cassino, Italy, he formulated the Benedictine Rule, which became the norm for monastic living throughout Europe. Monasteries were important centers of agricultural production and wealth as well as centers of learning and literacy. The monks copied the Bible and other religious texts and also ancient Roman books. A new type of monastic group, the friars, appeared in the 13th century. Two great founders of friar orders were St. Francis of Assisi, who founded the Franciscan order of friars in 1210, and St. Dominic, who founded the Dominican order in 1215. Friars swore a life of poverty and traveled from town to town to spread the word of the Gospel. Members of St. Dominic's order also assumed leadership of the intellectual work of the monks. A Dominican friar, St. Thomas Aquinas, used Greek philosophy to create some of the greatest works of Christian thought.

The most important Christian institution of the Middle Ages was that of the papacy. By the 4th and 5th centuries the bishop of Rome, the pope, was recognized as the highest spiritual authority in the church. Over time the power of the papacy expanded, as popes came to wield considerable influence in worldly matters. The growth of papal authority, however, caused tensions on a number of fronts. Several popes between the 11th and 13th centuries vied for power with rulers of the Holy Roman Empire. The assertion of papal primacy in Rome also antagonized the church in the Byzantine Empire. In 1054 Pope Leo IX excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Cerularius, and his followers, and the patriarch retaliated with a similar excommunication. The result was a permanent schism that divided Christendom into Western (Roman Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox) branches. (See also [Middle Ages](#); [Papacy](#).)

In the 16th century a new movement, the Reformation, emerged to further divide the Roman Catholic church, though the catalyst for the Reformation, Martin Luther, had wanted merely to improve the church. He had sought to discuss the powers of the pope and the teachings of the church with other Christian thinkers, but when he was ordered to stop he rejected the church's authority. Luther taught that all Christians had the right to read the Bible and that by faith alone they would be saved. His protest against the pope and church in Rome inspired others to examine the Bible and develop their own understanding of Christianity. The most important of these was John Calvin, the founder of the Reform church. King Henry VIII also broke from Rome and established the Church of England. The Roman Catholic church responded with the Counter-Reformation. The church created a list of banned books, a new order of priests, and the Roman Inquisition to combat heresy, and Catholic and Protestant rulers went to war with each other over matters of religion. (See also [Luther, Martin](#); [Lutheranism](#); [Reformation](#).)

Christianity in the Modern World

By the time of the Reformation, Europeans had begun the exploration of the rest of the world. Christopher Columbus and many other explorers hoped to spread Christianity, and when Europe divided into Roman Catholic and Protestant camps this desire became greater. The early explorers of the New World were joined by missionaries and priests who spread the faith. Spanish colonists in Mexico and South America baptized the native peoples; missionaries destroyed temples and built churches over them. The success of Spanish arms helped persuade the native peoples and many converted to Christianity. In 1531 a Mexican native and convert, Juan Diego, was, according to tradition, visited by the Virgin Mary, who commanded that a church be built. The Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, built near the site of this visitation, became the chief religious center of Mexico. Bartolomeo de las Casas, a Spanish-born Dominican missionary, championed the human

rights of the native peoples of the Americas and worked to improve the lives of the natives under Spanish rule. Christianity, especially Roman Catholic, would remain an essential part of South American culture and society. French Catholic missionaries helped colonize Canada and parts of the future United States, and Protestant missionaries from England, most importantly the Puritans, established colonies along the Atlantic seaboard and laid the foundation for the emergence of the United States.

The Reformation and discovery of the New World posed great challenges for Christianity, but even greater problems were to come. Most notably, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment changed the way many people understood the world around them. New discoveries in science questioned many of the basic assumptions of Christians. New ideas about government and society reduced church influence on daily affairs, and revolutions in the United States and France separated the church from the state. In the 18th and 19th centuries more new ideas, including that of evolution, undermined the hold of Christianity on many believers. In the 20th century the number of active Christians declined as society became increasingly secular.

Despite the decline in the importance of religion during the modern period, Christians continued to have an impact on the world. In the 19th century a new wave of missionary activity took place along with new European colonization, and Christianity was introduced or reintroduced to much of the world. Anglican churches were established in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Roman Catholic missionaries reached parts of northern and sub-Saharan Africa, especially on the eastern coast, and Catholic institutions were established alongside Protestant ones. Africans themselves created independent Christian churches in Nigeria and South Africa.

By the early 21st century, some of the most important developments in world Christianity had taken place outside of Europe and the United States. The Christian churches of Africa and Latin America had become vibrant centers of the faith, and the indigenous peoples of both regions took over the leadership of their churches from Europeans. The churches in Africa experienced dramatic growth during the 20th century and introduced a variety of liturgical innovations. Drawing on traditional African dance and ritual, religious services in Africa became the most creative and inspired ceremonies in world Christianity. Although Roman Catholicism remained the predominant faith in Latin America, as it had been since colonial times, Protestant faiths began to establish themselves in the region, and Pentecostal Christians attracted large followings. The Roman Catholic church also experienced change in Latin America, especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), when liturgical changes and other reforms were implemented. Liberation theology, a movement within Roman Catholicism that centered in Latin America, was a means to understand society and religion, and its supporters sought to institute new forms of church organization. By the early 21st century, many Latin American churchmen had become leaders in the Catholic church.

Major Beliefs and Practices

The beliefs of all Christians throughout the world are based on the teachings of Jesus. His message of love and brotherhood as well as his sacrifice on the cross and Resurrection from the dead are the cornerstone of all Christian faiths. His teachings are codified in the New Testament. Christians also include the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, in their Bible, but not all Christians agree on which books of the Old Testament should be included in the Bible. Jesus not only provided the basic message of the faith, but he is also the savior whose death offered everyone the path to life in heaven. Most Christians recognize Jesus as the son of God and accept the doctrine of the Trinity—the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead. Most Christians also believe that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human.

Christians celebrate their faith at weekly services that are presided over by a priest in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions or a lay minister in most Protestant traditions. The nature of the service varies among the denominations. For Catholics, it is the celebration and commemoration of the sacrifice of Jesus, and during the mass the communion offering is turned into the body and blood of Jesus. There is choral and instrumental music in the Catholic service as well as readings from Scripture and a sermon from the priest. The service in the Orthodox tradition is a mysterious ceremony rich in symbolism and ritual; the experience is heightened by the use of incense. Protestant services are less elaborate. In most traditions there is no priest and there are varying degrees of ritual. There are prayers, readings from Scripture, and sermons in these services. In some Reformed traditions there is no music, and the original Calvinist church service was described as being little more than four walls and a sermon. In Lutheran churches, however, choral and instrumental music is heard.

Christians celebrate a number of holy days throughout the year. One of the most important is the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas, which is celebrated on December 25 (Roman Catholics and Protestants) or January 6 (Eastern Orthodox). Easter, the feast of the Resurrection of Jesus, is also an important holiday. Both holidays are honored with a special church service commemorating the day, and many Christians attend a special midnight service for Christmas or a dawn service for Easter. Roman Catholics and other Christians observe Lent, a 40-day period of fasting and sacrifice in memory of Jesus, prior to Easter, and the Easter season includes the holidays of Palm Sunday (commemorating Jesus' entry to Jerusalem), Holy, or Maundy, Thursday (the Last Supper), and Good Friday (Jesus' crucifixion). Christmas, too, is preceded by the season of Advent, which celebrates the coming of the commemoration of the birth of Jesus.

There are a number of sacred rites that most Christians practice either during the regular weekly service or on special occasions during the year. All Christians partake in baptism, a ritual that brings a person into the community of believers. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and some Protestant Christians practice infant baptism, and the child is usually sprinkled with water and oil at the ceremony. Because the child cannot state his beliefs, godparents stand with the child and agree to help raise the child in the faith. Other Christians prefer believer's baptism, waiting until the person can state his beliefs, and some of these Christians baptize by immersing the person completely under water. All Christians also observe the rite of the body and blood of Jesus, which is called the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion. As with baptism, the understanding of this differs among denominations, and Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have the most elevated sense of the Eucharist as a sacrament and not merely as a commemoration of the Last Supper. All Christian churches offer the ceremony during weekly services, and church members approach the altar to receive the communion wafer—a piece of unleavened bread or a cracker—and, in some churches, a sip of wine or grape juice, just as Jesus gave his apostles bread and wine at the Last Supper.

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